

Moving Toward the Food Guide Pyramid

Implications for U.S. Agriculture

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Introduction

Diet-related chronic diseases account for nearly two-thirds of all deaths in the United States each year. Aside from the loss in human terms, these illnesses and premature deaths cause significant economic loss. USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) estimates that improved diets could save \$48 billion in annual medical costs and lost productivity resulting from disability, and another \$28 billion annually in the value of premature deaths (Frazao, 1999).^{1,2} Some researchers assert that proper diets may forestall an estimated 20 percent of these deaths annually.

Federal dietary recommendations outlined in the 1995 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*³ and depicted graphically in the Food Guide Pyramid (the Pyramid) are intended to help consumers improve their health and reduce their risk of diet-related disease. While many Americans are aware that the Pyramid can help them choose a balanced diet (American Dietetic Association, 1997), recent studies show that average U.S. diets differ considerably from the Pyramid recommendations (Bowman and others, 1998; Cleveland and others, January 1995, April 1997; Kantor, 1996, 1998, 1999; Krebs-Smith and others, 1995, 1996, 1997; Munoz and others, 1997; USDA, CNPP, 1995).

Although some consumption trends are moving diets closer to the Pyramid recommendations, the changes fall short of those needed to meet the recommendations (Kantor, 1998; 1999). For example, while Americans consumed record amounts of fruits and vegetables in 1997, consumption is still below Federal dietary benchmarks. At the same time, consumption of added sugars hit an all-time high, at more than two and half times the Pyramid upper limit.

Improved diets will require fundamental changes in daily food choices for many consumers. Consumers and health officials have looked to the agriculture and food industries, with their capacity to alter the nutrient content and amount of foods offered in the marketplace, for help in improving diets (Frazao, 1996).

In his pioneering paper on the implications of healthier diets for U.S. agriculture, O'Brien speculates on "the adjustments American agriculture would face if called upon to respond to—and hopefully, to facilitate—a large-scale move toward healthier diets" as defined by Federal dietary recommendations (O'Brien, 1995). This report builds on O'Brien's research by quantifying changes in domestic agricultural production and crop acreage that might occur if consumers fully adopted the Pyramid serving recommendations. The potential magnitude and direction of change in agricultural trade, nonfood uses for agricultural commodities, and food prices are also examined.

¹Estimates are in 1995 dollars.

²Full citations are listed in the References section.

³See glossary for definitions of italicized words.